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Daniel Watts

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# DILEMMATIC DELIBERATIONS IN KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Daniel Watts

My central claim in this paper is that Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is governed by the basic aim to articulate a real dilemma, and to elicit its proper recognition as such. I begin by indicating how Kierkegaard's works are shaped in general by this aim, and what the aim involves. I then show how the dilemmatic structure of *Fear and Trembling* is obscured in a recent dispute between Michelle Kosch and John Lippitt regarding the basic aims and upshot of the book. Finally, I consider two critical questions: Why does Kierkegaard present his dilemmatic reasoning in the form of a "dialectical lyric"? And why does he write a book that aims only to articulate a dilemma, and not also to resolve it?

Like other books by Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* is strikingly distinctive in form and style. The following features immediately stand out. First, the authorial voice is attributed to one Johannes de Silentio, whom we are evidently supposed to regard as a distinct personage, and whose name already sounds a note of paradox given that this John of Silence is supposed to be responsible for all these *words*. Second, the book defies classification: narrative vignettes, poetic refrains, panegyric outpourings, thought-experiments, satirical remarks, biblical and classical allusions—all these are intermingled with passages of dense argumentation of a kind more usually found in a conventional philosophical treatise. Third, the book is framed by an intriguing epigraph, which alludes to the story of the message Tarquinius conveyed to his son by getting the messenger to relay his wordless behaviour in a poppy field.<sup>1</sup> The epigraph thus sparks the suspicion that the book is intended to convey some kind of secret message—and commentators have been quick to follow this lead, albeit in all sorts of different directions. And fourth, the book departs markedly from familiar canons of philosophical writing in its lack of scholarly apparatus and intimate, self-ironizing tone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tarquinius strikes down the heads of the tallest poppies in the field; his son understands that he is to put to death the leading citizens of Gabii.

<sup>2</sup>The overall impression is indeed amply summed up by the following passage from Hamann which, up to the final copy, Kierkegaard apparently intended to use as an epigraph: "I express myself with many tongues, speak the language of sophists, of wordplay, of Cretes and Arabs, Whites and Moors and Creoles, babble criticism, mythology, matters of fact and



What, then, are we to make of the overall shape of *Fear and Trembling*? Its subtitle—"Dialectical Lyric"—encourages the thought that, notwithstanding any impression of a mere admixture, its lyrical and dialectical dimensions are supposed to hang together in a particular way. And we can see that the book does indeed hang together, I shall argue, provided we understand aright its author's remark that "my deliberation is dilemmatic."<sup>3</sup> For we shall see that *Fear and Trembling* is plausibly characterised as a whole in terms of the basic aim to articulate a particular dilemma, to show that this dilemma is a real one, and to elicit from the reader its proper recognition as such.

I shall begin by showing how Kierkegaard's works are shaped in general by the aim to articulate real dilemmas, under a certain conception of a "real dilemma," before turning more specifically to *Fear and Trembling*, and to its development of a complex constructive dilemma regarding Abraham and the concept of faith. This dilemma, I shall argue, is of continuing philosophical interest and import, presenting a challenge to all those who take themselves to be in a position to apply the concept of religious faith.

### *I. Kierkegaard about Dilemmas*

A few pages into his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard comments in characteristically sardonic vein on Xenophon's attempts to show what a scandalous injustice it was for the Athenians to sentence Socrates to death.<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard surmises that Plato and the Athenians must have regarded Xenophon's irenic intervention in somewhat the way that "one feels at times in an argument when—just as the point in dispute, precisely by being brought to a head, begins to become interesting—a helpful third party kindly takes it upon himself to reconcile the disputants, to take the whole matter back into a triviality."<sup>5</sup> Later in the dissertation, Kierkegaard registers a contrast with Socrates himself in this regard, commenting as follows on Socrates' reflections in Plato's *Apology* on whether it is better to live or die:

On the front of the stage, then, is Socrates—not as someone who rashly brushes away the thought of death and clings anxiously to life, not as someone who eagerly goes toward death and magnanimously sacrifices his life; not as someone who takes delight in the alternation of light and shadow

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first principles all mixed up, and argue now in a human way and now in an extraordinary way" (*Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong et al., 26 volumes, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978–2000], 6: 249–250, hereafter, cited as "KW," followed by volume and page number).

<sup>3</sup>KW 6: 93.

<sup>4</sup>Xenophon's defence only leaves Kierkegaard wondering why Plato should have taken it upon himself to immortalize, and the others to execute, such a "good natured, garrulous, droll character"—perhaps, he wryly moots, the sophisticated Athenians "wanted Socrates done away with because he bored them" (KW 2: 18n).

<sup>5</sup>KW 2: 16.

found in a syllogistic *aut / aut* [either / or] . . . and . . . with a kind of inquisitiveness longs for the solution of the riddle.<sup>6</sup>

Against all helpful third parties, we are to juxtapose Socrates' delight in the unfolding of a difficult dilemma, and in the pathos-filled search for its resolution. And Socrates is distinguished above all by the way in which he is "always prepared to set the problem afloat if it runs aground . . . always knows how to keep the problem in suspension, and precisely therein and thereby wants to resolve it."<sup>7</sup>

That these are no passing remarks in a youthful work is already indicated by the title of Kierkegaard's first publication after the dissertation, *Either / Or*. In a telling remark in his papers, Kierkegaard makes it clear that this title is in no way adventitious:

That which matters most to me about the whole of *Either / Or* is that it become really evident that the metaphysical meaning that underlies it all leads everywhere to the dilemma.<sup>8</sup>

It is a moot point just how the contents of *Either / Or*—which the reader is liable to find bewildering—are supposed to bring to light something in general about dilemmas. Certainly we may note that, in the introduction, our attention is drawn to the possibility that the aesthetic and ethical outlooks voiced, respectively, in the two parts of book are not merely at odds but represent the internal conflict of a single mind, i.e., the mind of one who is both compelled and repelled by both. And it is no doubt crucial to the overall impact of *Either / Or* that, despite the way in which the rather self-satisfied Judge in Part II takes the moral high ground in his stolid defence of marriage, the melancholy note sounded in the first, aesthetic part remains deeply resonant throughout. But without getting embroiled in the details of this text, suffice it to say here that its title, together with Kierkegaard's remark about what matters to him most about this work, clearly indicates that the idea of a dilemma enters into its most basic aims.

Now it is difficult not to suspect that, when Kierkegaard complains about Xenophon's irenic intervention, it is not primarily *Xenophon* he has in mind. For, as is well known, Kierkegaard was especially perplexed by the claims made by the Hegelians of his own day to have overcome the dichotomies of our ordinary forms of understanding, and to have discovered a systematic general method for their mediation and reconciliation. Thus, a typical passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

Hegel himself has more than once emphatically held judgement day on the kind of thinkers who remain in the sphere of understanding and reflection and who have therefore insisted that there is an either/or. Since that day, it

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<sup>6</sup>KW 2: 81.

<sup>7</sup>KW 2: 121.

<sup>8</sup>*Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978), Vol. 4: 526. Cited hereafter as "JP," followed by volume and page number.

has become a popular game, so that as soon as someone hints at an *aut / aut* [either / or] a Hegelian comes riding trip-trap-trap on a horse . . . and wins a victory and rides home again . . .<sup>9</sup>

The satirical figure of the knights of infinite mediation recalls the first lines of the dissertation, in which Kierkegaard had also depicted philosophers as knights of the Idea, riding out to seize hold of "the phenomenon," adding, however, that in this chivalric adventure "one sometimes hears too much of the jangling of spurs and the voice of the master."<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, it turns out on Kierkegaard's view that *Socrates* is one phenomenon that is not so easily mastered.

As the image of the trip-trapping Hegelians also illustrates, Kierkegaard's polemical orientation in this regard is especially marked by his perception of the merely mechanical way in which general methodological procedures are applied to particular philosophical problems. For what he thinks this indicates is the absence of the characteristic affective dimension or pathos that attends the genuine recognition of an *either / or*, the feeling of push and pull, of perplexity and disorientation, of longing for a way out. And what Kierkegaard says of paradox surely goes as well for dilemma when he writes for example that "paradox is the real *pathos* of intellectual life."<sup>11</sup> The affective dimension appropriate to an engagement with particular paradoxes and dilemmas is evidently crucial in Kierkegaard's view if we are to avoid the danger in philosophy that our inquiries become glib and pointless.<sup>12</sup>

Whether any of this is fair to Hegel or the Hegelians closer to Kierkegaard's home it is no part of my aim to adjudicate here. But what is clear is that, early in his writing career, Kierkegaard formed the view that the *milieu* of his day was scarcely conducive to the proper recognition of real dilemmas as such, and that what was needed was someone to act, in the spirit of Socrates, to resist the overtures of all these helpful third parties. We ought to ask what kind of dilemmas are at stake in this aim, however, and in what sense "real" ones. Kierkegaard does not expressly reflect at length on his practice in this regard, and we shall turn to an example of his

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<sup>9</sup>KW 12.1: 306.

<sup>10</sup>KW 2: 9. Later in the dissertation, one such master is named: "when the phenomena are paraded" Kierkegaard writes "Hegel . . . is in too much of a hurry and is too aware of the great importance of his role as commander-in-chief of world history to take time for the more than the royal glimpse he allows to glide over them" (KW 2: 222).

<sup>11</sup>JP 3: 399. Compare Kierkegaard's remark that "the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without passion—a paltry mediocrity" (KW 7: 37).

<sup>12</sup>Compare in this connection one of Wittgenstein's more acerbic remarks: "Some philosophers (or whatever you like to call them) suffer from what may be called 'loss of problems'. Then everything seems quite simple to them, no deep problems seem to exist anymore, the world becomes broad and flat and loses all depth, and what they write becomes immeasurably shallow and trivial" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §455). Wittgenstein goes on to single out Russell and H. G. Wells as victims of "loss of problems," but Kierkegaard would surely have recognized the phenomenon.

practice shortly, but let me approach this question obliquely, by forestalling some likely misconceptions.

First, Kierkegaard is sometimes associated with a choice between rationally indifferent but mutually exclusive options. On one fairly standard picture, what we are offered in Kierkegaard's works is a trilemma between aesthetic, ethical and religious life-style options, informed that we have no rational grounds for choosing between these standpoints, and invited to take the leap, and plump for one or another.<sup>13</sup> Among the many problems with this picture, however, is that it makes it quite obscure why Kierkegaard should characterize his mode of communication as he does in terms of "dialectical knots" which it is left for the reader to untie.<sup>14</sup> Far from evoking the idea of liberty of indifference, this image clearly echoes Aristotle's well-known characterisation of an *aporia* in terms of a "knot in the object" and indicates a thorough entanglement of reasons *pro* and *contra*.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaardian dilemmas seem closer in this regard to the sorts of cases Gilbert Ryle had in mind when he remarked that in certain disputes "we often find one and the same thinker—very likely oneself—strongly inclined to champion both sides and yet, at the very same time, strongly inclined entirely to repudiate one of them just because he is strongly inclined to support the other."<sup>16</sup>

Second, whilst it is certainly plausible to associate with Kierkegaard the idea of dilemmas that are in some sense *real* ones, there is no good reason to attribute to him some version of the theory that there exists a plurality of incommensurable goods, such that it is knowable *a priori* that there exist irresolvable dilemmas. For one thing, the claim to know that there exist irreconcilable collisions of this kind is a rather strong claim to knowledge, and one that sits uneasily with Kierkegaard's avowed attempts to take seriously the standpoint of Socratic ignorance. For another thing, as the title of one of his religious discourses already indicates—"Purity of Heart is to Will one Thing"—Kierkegaard's sympathies are, to the contrary, with those who affirm the unity of the Good. What is clear, however, is that Kierkegaard thinks there are dilemmas that do not admit of a certain kind of resolution: namely, the kind that consists in showing that the two sides of an apparent dilemma are really just two sides of the same conceptual coin.

Third, one might naturally suppose that Kierkegaard's interest attaches solely to *practical* dilemmas, i.e., to practical rather than intellectual

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<sup>13</sup>On this picture, it is as though Kierkegaard were saying, as John Elrod put it, "My dear reader, these are the existence possibilities open to you; take your choice" (John W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975], 4).

<sup>14</sup>Compare the remark in Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* that "it is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot—and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself" (KW 20: 133).

<sup>15</sup>For Kierkegaard's express repudiation of *liberum arbitrium* see, for example, JP 5.11: 59. For the figure of the dialectical knot see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* III.1, 995<sup>a</sup>29–30.

<sup>16</sup>Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 1.

ones. After all, it is a notable feature of his works to have to do with such eminently practical matters as whether or not to get married; and it is a characteristic complaint of his that, when problems of a basically practical nature are approached in a basically theoretical way, method and problem pass one another by. One thing Kierkegaard also often emphasized, however, is that thinking is itself a kind of activity; and, as we shall see in the case of *Fear and Trembling*, his work does centrally involve the articulation of dilemmas about *what to think* about certain things (including marriage). Indeed, we can give a recognizably Kierkegaardian gloss on the notion in general of a “real dilemma” in terms of the claim that, when we attend closely to certain real-life phenomena, we find ourselves assailed by dilemmas regarding what to think about them, such that these dilemmas do not admit of conceptual mediation. Plausibly, the lives of Socrates, Christ and Abraham are central examples of phenomena that Kierkegaard regarded as posing real dilemmas for thought.

Let us turn, then, to *Fear and Trembling* and to its treatment of Abraham’s dilemma.

## II. A Dispute about Fear and Trembling

According to the Genesis narrative, Abraham faced an appalling dilemma: *either* to disobey God, who thus far had lead him so faithfully and who had promised to make him father of many nations through his beloved Isaac, *or* to violate his sacred duties to his son, and set out on the lonely journey to Moriah. Abraham, as we know, grasps one horn, makes the journey, lifts the knife—and God substitutes the ram. But *Fear and Trembling* works to disrupt any tendency on our part to read this story in the light of its end, drawing out the sheer horror of Abraham’s journey.<sup>17</sup>

*Fear and Trembling* is not solely constituted by the attempt to depict Abraham’s dilemma, however. For its author evidently thinks that *we* (for some “we”) face a real dilemma when we reflect on this story, and on its implications for our understanding of faith. Indeed, as I shall argue, de Silentio’s dialectical lyric is plausibly characterized as a whole by the aim to articulate a real dilemma about Abraham, and in such a way as to elicit its proper recognition as such. In order to bring out what is at stake in this claim, however, let me first lay out the main lines of a recent dispute about the most basic aims and upshot of the book.

In a recent paper, Michelle Kosch claims that *Fear and Trembling* does indeed have a secret message, and the message is that it is impossible for the biblical Abraham, or indeed anyone else, to serve as an exemplar of faith:

Abraham is taken to be faith’s most eminent representative, and Johannes *de silentio* has (unwittingly) conveyed the message that in order to survive

<sup>17</sup>For an illuminating account of this dimension of *Fear and Trembling* see Lasse Horne Kjaelgaard, “‘The Peak on Which Abraham Stands’: The Pregnant Moment of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63.2 (2002): 303–321.



in the terrain of faith the reader must eliminate him, along with every other example.<sup>18</sup>

We may begin to reconstruct Kosch's argument for this arresting conclusion by distinguishing two levels of interpretation. On the first level—the level of what Kosch calls the manifest content of the book—we are to attribute to de Silentio something like the following style of reasoning; call it the Manifest Argument:

1. Abraham is an exemplar of faith
2. If Abraham is an exemplar of faith then (to echo de Silentio's dominant economic imagery) the life of faith is far more costly than it's often made out to be.

Therefore: the life of faith is far more costly than it's often made out to be.

At the surface level, then, we are invited to read the book as an attempt to "jack up the price of faith" by emphasizing just how demanding Abraham's ordeal really was. This, for example, seems to be the import of de Silentio's well-known characterization of faith as a double-movement of resignation and affirmation, where Abraham's conduct supposedly expresses his extraordinary ability not only to give up Isaac, but also to give up his overwhelming reasons to expect that, once the deed is done, Isaac will no longer be around.

Nonetheless Kosch thinks we must keep in mind here how Tarquinius's message to his son was unwittingly passed on by the messenger; for she wants to show that Johannes de Silentio is intended by Kierkegaard to convey to his readers the covert message that they must jettison Abraham *qua* model of the life of faith. The way to decode this message, she thinks, is to see that, and why, the Manifest Argument signally fails. In short, the Real Argument of the book runs something like this:

1. No claim of the form "X exemplifies faith" can be known to be true.
2. If it is possible that X serves as an exemplar of *F* then X is *F* and X can be known to be *F*.

Therefore nothing could possibly serve as an exemplar of faith.

If this argument is sound, it should be clear that the first premise of the Manifest Argument is false, and necessarily so. It cannot possibly be that Abraham serves as an exemplar of faith, according to this argument, since no-one can be known to be an example of faith and it must be possible to know of any exemplar that it is an example of whatever it serves to represent. How, then, does Kosch try to establish that this is indeed the Real

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<sup>18</sup>Michelle Kosch, "What Abraham Couldn't Say," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 77.



Argument of *Fear and Trembling*? We may note that she says nothing to establish the attribution to Kierkegaard of the second premise of this argument — though she clearly needs this, and it is far from obviously true. But the two major strands in the defence of her attribution to Kierkegaard of the first premise are as follows.

First of all, Kosch flags up a puzzle regarding Johannes' defence of the Manifest Argument. The puzzle is that there is a gaping hole in this defence, since he makes no attempt to establish its first premise. De Silentio merely *stipulates* that Abraham really is a "knight of faith," that he really does have a command from God, that he really isn't a lunatic or evil-doer. But these stipulations are of course no help whatsoever in the defence of the Manifest Argument. And this is especially puzzling if we suppose that the aim of the book is to show that the life of faith is more demanding than folks these days like to think. For as we know, one man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens* and, as Kierkegaard certainly knew, folks like Kant and Hegel were denying that appropriating the concept of religious faith requires regarding Abraham's conduct as exemplary. Kant, indeed, can scarcely contain his indignation:

in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. \*We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God — of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven."<sup>19</sup>

How then could the Manifest Argument of *Fear and Trembling* be expected to bite against more enlightened accounts of the concept of faith such as those advanced by Kant and Hegel or for those denizens of Danish Christendom who might be open to such accounts?

Secondly, Kosch homes in on de Silentio's claim that Abraham's ordeal is such that he cannot *speak*, cannot disclose himself, cannot give reasons for his conduct. The only grounds on which de Silentio could intelligibly base this claim, she argues, is that, even if Abraham really is justified by God, he could never *know* that he is so justified and could therefore have no warrant to appeal to this justification as a reason for doing what he does. That is, de Silentio must think Abraham has in principle no way of distinguishing between the case in which he is a genuine exemplar of faith, justified by God, from the case in which he is a lunatic or evil-doer.

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<sup>19</sup>Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263. The sentences following the asterisk appear as a footnote in the text.

But if *that* is his explanation for Abraham's silence, Kosch reasons, it follows from de Silentio's view that no genuine example of faith could ever be recognized as such, and he surely ought to draw the entailment that nothing could serve as its exemplar. And, in that case, he undercuts his own claims to *know* that Abraham is an example of faith. If de Silentio fails to draw these implications, however, Kosch thinks Kierkegaard does not, and expects his readers to get the message.

Now one question we might register here is why anyone who wanted to defend what Kosch presents as the Real Argument of the book would go to such elaborate lengths to appear not to do so. Given these aims, what could be gained by the subterfuge? This question is especially pressing in the light of the fact that there is reason to doubt that Kierkegaard believed the conclusion of this argument. Thus, in his reply to Kosch, John Lippitt is able to draw on many texts in which Kierkegaard apparently relies on the possibility of religious exemplars.<sup>20</sup> Lippitt's basic move, however, is to defend the attribution to Kierkegaard of the Manifest Argument whilst denying that he even purports to demonstrate its first premise. Rather, Lippitt claims, the argumentative force of this text crucially turns on an antecedent commitment to Abraham's status as a hero of faith, in a way that reflects Kierkegaard's orthodox view of scriptural authority.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Lippitt denies that the book sets out to provide arguments with probative force for those who do not share this prior commitment.

Putting aside the issue of subterfuge, it thus turns out on the views of both Kosch and Lippitt that *Fear and Trembling* can have little to say to those who do not already regard Abraham as a religious hero. Now one might find this result disappointing: for one might have hoped the book would cast its critical net wider than a certain sort of religious conservative. For reasons I shall come to shortly, I think it does.

For his part, Lippitt goes on to defend a very different account of the "message" of *Fear and Trembling*, which appeals to a distinctively Christian, typological reading of the Biblical story. To consider this rival interpretative framework would take us too far afield, but the important point for our purposes here is that he evidently thinks this reading is wholly compatible with, and indeed relies upon, Abraham's status as a religious

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<sup>20</sup>Consider, for an example Lippitt doesn't cite, the following from Kierkegaard's *Journals*: "With the aid of mediocrity's cheap dishonesty, Christendom has managed to lose the prototypes completely. We need to reintroduce the prototypes, make them recognizable, something that can be done only by: Either/Or. Either you have quality in common, or you are on another qualitative level—but not this 'also—well, not quite, but nevertheless—also'" (JP 2: 299).

<sup>21</sup>Thus Lippitt writes, "Kosch worries that *Fear and Trembling's* verdict on Abraham . . . is 'as likely to drive the bourgeois Christian into the arms of Kant et. al. as to succeed in driving up the price of faith' . . . What we need, she argues, is an antecedent commitment to taking Abraham as a model of faith. But for Kierkegaard, I submit, that antecedent commitment is simply scriptural authority" (John Lippitt, "What Neither Abraham Nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 84).

exemplar.<sup>22</sup> So it ought to be clear that Lippitt's view stands directly opposed to Kosch's: on the one account, the aim is to show that there can be no exemplars of faith, Abraham included; on the other account, the aim is to examine what follows from the view that Abraham is an exemplar of faith, where this view is treated as a prior commitment.

For this reason, I take it that we may not regard this dispute, in an ecumenical spirit, merely as a happy function of the plenitude of interpretative possibilities thrown up by Kierkegaard's text. Indeed, we face something of a puzzle here: for it is natural to wonder why sophisticated readers are able to cite substantial textual evidence on behalf of contrary characterizations of a book's most basic aims. Of course one might, in a less generous spirit, regard this as a lamentable function of the confused state of Kierkegaard's thought. In the final section of this paper, I shall advance a simple but hopefully more satisfying hypothesis: viz. that the dispute between Kosch and Lippitt merely reproduces the dilemma which it is the most basic aim of *Fear and Trembling* to articulate.<sup>23</sup>

### III. A Dilemma about Abraham

One point on which Kosch and Lippitt are agreed is that it is "implausibly simplistic to read *Fear and Trembling* as arguing straightforwardly for the superiority of 'the religious' to 'the ethical.'"<sup>24</sup> And one thing that to my mind tells decisively against any such reading is that de Silentio repeatedly draws our attention to the *merely dilemmatic* structure of his reasoning. At one point, for just one example, he envisages conditions under which we might suppose that "we are in the presence of the paradox [of faith]," adding, however, that we may suppose this only if we may suppose that "there is any [such paradox] at all (for my deliberation is dilemmatic)."<sup>25</sup> And over and over again he sums up his deliberations in an expressly dilemmatic form: *either* Abraham exemplifies the paradox of faith *or* we lose Abraham. So far as the *manifest* content of this text goes, at least, there is no impression of its having established either disjunct of this conclusion.

Whilst I am certainly not the first reader to have noticed that *Fear and Trembling* articulates a dilemma, I think the full significance of this fact is often missed, and is seriously obscured by the recent dispute between

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<sup>22</sup>The case for the interpretation Lippitt favours has been developed with great subtlety by Stephen Mulhall in his *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). We may note in passing, however, that it is doubtful whether Mulhall's reading is compatible with an appeal to Abraham as a religious exemplar, at least in the sense of a model to be followed. For, on this typological reading, the story of the binding of Isaac is to be understood as a symbol of the Christian story of redemption wherein Abraham stands to Isaac as God the Father stands to God the Son: and Abraham's conduct must be regarded as wholly indefensible apart from this symbolism.

<sup>23</sup>I hope this makes me the sort of helpful third-party to a dispute who avoids the charge of reducing it all to a triviality!

<sup>24</sup>Lippitt, "What Neither Abraham Nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say," 80.

<sup>25</sup>KW 6: 93.

Kosch and Lippitt.<sup>26</sup> In particular, a proper appreciation of the expressly “dilemmatic” form of de Silentio’s deliberations, I want to suggest, enables us to see how these deliberations can have force, not only for those who already regard themselves as spiritual heirs of Abraham, but also for those who might be quite prepared to dissociate the concept of religious faith from the Biblical Abraham. In my view, the central argument advanced in *Fear and Trembling* presents a challenge, not just to the denizens of nineteenth-century Danish Christendom, inasmuch as these can be presumed to have had a prior commitment to Abraham’s authoritative status, but to us all, inasmuch as we take ourselves to know what it means to have religious faith.

What, then, is the specific content of Johannes’ dilemmatic deliberations? It appears that the overall line of his argument has the form of the complex constructive dilemma, the major premise of which, for want of a pithy formulation, is this:

*(First Conjunct)* If Abraham’s conduct is defensible on distinctively religious grounds, then three paradoxical consequences follow: it must be possible for there to be (i) a teleological suspension of the ethical (at least on some conception of the ethical); (ii) an overriding duty to God; and (iii) conditions in which, barring aesthetic reasons, one is justified in failing to satisfy the demands of ethical disclosure; and

*(Second Conjunct)* if Abraham’s conduct is not defensible on distinctively religious grounds, then (at least) two paradoxical consequences follow: (i) there can be no warrant of any kind for an appeal to Abraham *qua* exemplar of faith and (ii) nothing hitherto experienced counts as an instance of faith.

The minor premise, of course, is that either Abraham’s conduct is defensible on religious grounds or it is not; from all of which it is supposed to follow that either we must admit the paradoxical possibility of a teleological suspension of the ethical (and etc.), or we must bite the bullet there can be no grounds of any kind for an appeal to Abraham *qua* hero of faith, and, moreover, no grounds for regarding anything hitherto observed as an instance of faith.<sup>27</sup> Establishing this argument is the burden of the

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<sup>26</sup>On the hypothetical, dilemmatic character of de Silentio’s reasoning see, for example, Alistair Hanney’s introduction in *Søren Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling* (London: Penguin, 1985); Merold Westphal, “Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Mercer University Press: Macon, 1994), 14; Claire Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling* (London: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>27</sup>It is sometimes argued that arguments of this form are fallacious, on the grounds that such arguments could be valid only if their conclusions were to specify a non-exhaustive disjunction, in which case, however, the minor premise would be redundant. Suffice it to say here that Johannes’ argument may be recast, in a valid form at least, as follows: (1) If a teleological suspension of the ethical (and etc.) is not possible, then Abraham’s conduct is not defensible on religious grounds; (2) If Abraham’s conduct is not defensible on religious grounds, there can be no grounds for an appeal to his conduct as exemplary of faith, nor for

"Problemata" sections of the book and I should emphasize that it is not my aim here to defend it. Against the background of the dispute between Kosch and Lippitt, however, we may observe the following about Johannes' dilemmatic argument strategy as such.

First, *both* disjuncts of de Silentio's conclusion are clearly intended to strike the reader as jarring and paradoxical. It is not the case, therefore, that we are simply left to make a further judgement as to which of the two options in play is the better supported. That is, not only does de Silentio establish no decisive case for either side of his dilemma; he presents both sides as *horns*. And we may note especially in this regard the claim that if Abraham's conduct is not defensible on religious grounds, there can be no warrant for regarding him as an exemplar of faith and, moreover, no grounds for subsuming anything hitherto observed under the concept of faith. Now it is of course true that the first of these consequences will appear paradoxical only to those who are otherwise disposed in some way to regard Abraham as a religious hero.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, de Silentio makes it quite plain that his proximal target is what he regards as the dishonest attempt of those who would have their cake and eat it in this respect. But the same is surely not true of the arresting claim that it also follows that faith has never yet been exemplified. This claim is perfectly explicit in the text and is indeed reiterated. To cite just one:

And yet faith is this paradox, or else (and I ask the reader to bear these consequences *in mente* even though it would be too prolix for me to write them all down) or else faith has never existed simply because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost.<sup>29</sup>

This is a strong claim, and its defence crucially relies on de Silentio's various attempts to show that only the special sort of dilemma Abraham faces could have a distinctively *religious* (rather than an aesthetic or ethical) character. But notice the paradoxical form in which de Silentio chooses to present the consequence that faith has never yet been instantiated: this is so, he says, because faith has always been instantiated. What can this mean? I suppose it means that faith, properly speaking, has never been exemplified just because, on this horn of the dilemma, all that has only ever been exemplified is merely "faith" in the bowdlerised sense of modern philosophy, the sense in which faith is brought into "the rather commonplace company of feelings, moods, idiosyncrasies, *vapeurs* etc.," the realm of "first immediacy."<sup>30</sup> On this side of the dilemma, therefore, no distinctively religious application of the term "faith" could be warranted

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regarding anything hitherto observed as an instance of faith. Therefore: if a teleological suspension (and etc.) is not possible, there can be no grounds for an appeal to Abraham's conduct as exemplary of faith, nor for regarding anything hitherto observed as an instance of faith.

<sup>28</sup>There can surely be no doubt that, in the opening sections of the book, de Silentio aims to foster this disposition.

<sup>29</sup>KW 6: 56.

<sup>30</sup>KW 6: 69.

by appeal to a given exemplar; for, according to de Silentio's argument, if *Abraham* does not exemplify faith in a distinctively religious sense, no one ever has. And that surely would be an uncomfortable conclusion, not for the hyper-orthodox, but for those who would lay claim to the concept of faith whilst doing away with Abraham.

Secondly, the claim that Abraham is justified, despite his inability to speak in the way putatively required by the demands of ethical disclosure, is itself merely conditional on the supposition that his conduct is defensible on religious grounds. *Pace* Kosch, the claim that Abraham's silence is both necessary and justified is not something de Silentio claims to *know*, it is something he infers as a consequence of the undischarged supposition that Abraham's conduct is defensible on religious grounds.

And thirdly, and *pace* Lippitt, nowhere does de Silentio indicate that the reasons against regarding Abraham's conduct as heroic—the reasons for finding his conduct repellent and horrific—can be rebuffed merely by appeal to scriptural authority. To be sure, de Silentio's argument strategy is evidently designed to have special purchase against those who, as professing Christians, profess to belong to one of the religious traditions in which Abraham's example is accepted as authoritative, but whose assimilation of the views of modern philosophers puts them at odds with this profession. *Fear and Trembling* thus reflects the aim, no doubt behind much of Kierkegaard's work, to elicit from the denizens of Christendom the sober acknowledgement that, hiding behind Hegelian talk of "mediation," they take seriously neither the claims of pagan philosophy nor of Christianity.<sup>31</sup> But it does not follow that de Silentio's argument can have probative force only for those who already adopt an orthodox view of scriptural authority. This would indeed be the case if his deliberations were well represented (as both Kosch and Lippitt appear to think) by a simple argument *modus ponens* from the claim that Abraham exemplifies faith to a conclusion about the nature of faith; but this plainly fails to do justice to their dilemmatic form. Moreover, it is not the case that an assumed commitment to the authority of scripture is de Silentio's only basis for presenting as problematic the conclusion that Abraham was a lunatic or an evil-doer. As we have emphasized, that we "lose Abraham" is not in de Silentio's view the only problematic consequence on this horn of the dilemma; for he further argues that if Abraham doesn't exemplify faith, in a distinctively religious sense, then no one ever has.

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<sup>31</sup>Compare *Philosophical Fragments*, which begins with the Shakespearian motto, "better willed than ill wed," and ends with "the moral" that "to go beyond Socrates when one says essentially the same as Socrates, only not nearly so well—that at least is not Socratic" (KW 7: 3; 111); and the following from *Postscript*: "That someone prefers paganism to Christianity is not at all confusing, but to make paganism out to be the highest within Christianity is an injustice both to Christianity, which becomes something different from what it is, and to paganism, which becomes nothing whatsoever, though it was indeed something" (KW 12.1: 361). For a helpful discussion of the role of *Fear and Trembling* in Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom see C. Stephen Evans's introduction in *Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



These features of the argument strategy of *Fear and Trembling* begin to indicate that its manifest aim is the broadly Socratic one of inducing in its addressees a state of *aporia* about its central concept, by articulating a particular dilemma regarding that concept. If so, and to the extent that they are compelling, de Silentio's dilemmatic deliberations present a problem to all those who regard themselves as in a position to apply the concept of religious faith, not just to those who already venerate Abraham, or the hyper-orthodox, or even those who regard themselves as religious. Attending to their dilemmatic form thus allows us to see how these deliberations present an on-going challenge to philosophers of religion and professed believers, including those who would prefer to interpret religious faith in a way that does not imply anything so unpalatable as the possibility of a teleological suspension of the ethical, or an absolute duty to God, or justified silence in the face of the demands of ethical disclosure; for the overall upshot of de Silentio's manifest argument is that we must either somehow come to terms with these paradoxical consequences of taking seriously the Biblical Abraham, or else acknowledge that we have no real use for the concept of religious faith.

One relatively straightforward gloss on the significance of de Silentio's name is that he remains silent about how his central dilemma is to be resolved. This is not to preclude that his silence conveys some sort of covert message, however. On the contrary, extending the comparison with Plato, we might expect this aporetic text to have a proleptic dimension, providing hints as to how the problem might be further worked through, and pointing forward, perhaps, to other works.<sup>32</sup> It hardly seems unlikely, moreover, that Kierkegaard has designed this text, *qua* dialectical knot, in such a way that we also face a dilemma about *Johannes*, whether or not *he* is to be trusted, so that our confrontation with dilemma ramifies through each level of interpretation, so to speak. Nonetheless, it is surely a minimal constraint on a plausible reading of this text that it does not merely assume that the dilemma at the centre of its manifest content has somehow been resolved.

I have been trying to bring out the dilemmatic structure of *Fear and Trembling*, by showing how this structure is obscured in the interpretations offered by both Kosch and Lippitt. But one might object that my characterisation fails to do justice to the lyrical or non-discursive aspects of the book, focussing as it does on de Silentio's mode of reasoning. And

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<sup>32</sup>We do indeed find references to *Fear and Trembling* in other works by Kierkegaard, and such as to indicate that he thinks de Silentio's dilemmatic deliberations are far from the last words on the topic. Thus, in *Postscript*, we read that de Silentio's poetic portrayal of Abraham *qua* knight of faith is a "rash anticipation," in that it fails properly to address the deep problems Climacus thinks are involved in the very attempt to poetically portray an example of religious faith (KW 12.1: 500n). Whilst I disagree with Kosch that this passage betrays Kierkegaard's real doctrine that nothing can possibly serve as a religious exemplar, I do think it shows that we would be too quick to suppose that Kierkegaard's own preferred solution to de Silentio's dilemma is simply to affirm the consequences he infers from the supposition that Abraham was a knight of faith.



one might still wonder why, if the basic aim is to defend a constructive dilemma, Kierkegaard should have pursued this straight-forward aim in so quixotic a way.

Now, *Fear and Trembling* certainly does *more* than merely draw out a set of consequences from the hypothesis that Abraham was justified in setting out for Moriah and a set of consequences from the hypothesis that he was not. Nonetheless, the lyrical dimensions of the book are plausibly in the service of Johannes' dilemmatic deliberations, and in two main ways. Firstly, as the title of the opening section of the book might lead us to expect—variously translated “Attunement,” “Prelude,” “Proem,” “Exordium”—the lyrical dimensions serve to *attune* us to thinking in a concrete and specific way about Abraham, so that we are better able to study closely what is special about his case. As we have noted, the claim that Abraham's dilemma is utterly distinctive—without analogy in cases of tragic heroism, for example—is a crucial step in de Silentio's argument. And, second, the lyrical dimensions of the book serve to sharpen the pathos of the dilemma, calling on us one moment to attend to magnificent and noble aspects of the story, the next to that which is disturbing and horrific. In this way, *Fear and Trembling* seeks not *merely* to advance a dilemmatic argument, but to do so in such a way as to elicit the kind of pathos that is characteristic of the proper recognition of a real dilemma as such.

Finally, let me briefly consider a further question which becomes pressing, given my characterisation of Kierkegaard's aims. The puzzle is simply why an author would set out with the aim *merely* to articulate a dilemma, and not also to resolve it.

No doubt Kierkegaard's aims are informed in this regard by his opposition to Hegelian “mediation.” But the rationale for a *merely* dilemmatic form of deliberation runs deeper. For Kierkegaard evidently thinks that the issue about Abraham is ultimately an *existential* dilemma—that is, a dilemma in which one's very being and identity are at stake. In the case of *Fear and Trembling*, the question, ultimately, is whether *I am able* to inherit a religious tradition that regards Abraham's conduct as exemplary or whether *I am able* to live without appeal to the concept of faith. And when philosophy has to do with questions of this kind, it is a good Kierkegaardian point that no one else can do philosophy for you. The highest role a teacher could play in this regard is that of the Socratic midwife, whose art is to enable the learner, as Kierkegaard liked to say, “to stand alone—by another's help.”<sup>33</sup> It is a difficult further question, no doubt, how exactly we should understand the notion of an existential dilemma. But it is clear that Kierkegaard's restricted aim to articulate dilemmas is based in his sense of the irreducibly first-personal and existentially constitutive nature of the issues ultimately at stake.

It is also a further question how we are to judge *Fear and Trembling*, measured against the aim to articulate a real dilemma about Abraham, and to

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<sup>33</sup>*JP* 1: 280.

elicit its proper recognition as such. But I do hope to have shown that the central argument through which the book pursues this aim is of more than merely historical interest, and cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it begs the question by simply assuming the authoritative status of the Biblical Abraham. And I hope to have shown that it is only when we measure the book against this aim that we are able to regard it, not as a motley collection of disparate elements and contradictory messages, but as a poem of a properly philosophical kind, a dialectical lyric.<sup>34</sup>

*University of Essex*

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